

## What Price Postmodernism? :

### A Case Study in the Funding of Intellectual Movements

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Intellectual histories often account for the development of ideas and intellectual trends as responses to larger historical events, and as the results of debates held between thinkers. For example, Oliver Wendell Holmes' contribution to pragmatism has been explained as a response both to the horrors of the Civil War, brought on (in his view) by the clash of absolutist ideologies, as well as his dissatisfaction with the prevailing rival legal theories, each of which could be used to justify any court ruling a judge would care to give.<sup>1</sup>

However, resources- intellectual, cultural, and especially financial- are less often considered as instrumental to the development and promulgation of intellectual movements.<sup>2</sup> This paper is a preliminary study of the role of such resources in the growth of one such movement- namely, Postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> Not only will this provide insight into the progress of intellectual movements in general, but will also provide some important context in resolving some questions about Postmodernism in particular- including regarding its political legacy. As Postmodernism is a highly contested and polysemic term, a definition and time frame will first be provided. Note also that this work is limited to a consideration of Postmodernism in the United States.

### The What of Postmodernism

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Holmes and the development of pragmatism, see, for example, Louis Menard *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, New York, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> This may be more true of U.S. intellectual history than European, perhaps because of an American belief in a democratic marketplace of ideas. For but one example of a European intellectual history in which patronage is central, see Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is part of the author's larger, ongoing dissertation in support of the Ph.D. degree in History at the Ohio State University, *How We Became Postmodern*.

Philosopher Judith Butler: "I remain unclear about its meaning, about whether I am Postmodern, or whether anyone knows."<sup>4</sup>

While even its proponents have had difficulty defining Postmodernism (for example, Andreas Huyssen, over a hundred pages into a book on Postmodernism, dismissively states "I will not attempt here to define what Postmodernism *Is*, "5 ) there are two historically important, though not mutually exclusive, definitions of Postmodernism worth examining. Jean Francois Lyotard described the Postmodern condition as one of "the incredulity of the meta-narrative."<sup>6</sup> For Lyotard, Postmodern theory had not only undermined the claims to authority of Modern narratives of historical progress, such as capitalism, democracy, nationalism, science, Marxism, etc., but, because the Postmodern critique of epistemology that knowledge is socially constructed, - i.e. "Truth is in other words, a *social relation*." 7- has rendered all truth claims suspect, no future meta-narratives will be able to take their place.

Ihab Hassan, on the other hand, provides a stylistic definition of Postmodernism that juxtaposes qualities of Modernism versus Postmodernism. His now well-known table of differences is as follows:

TABLE  
Schematic Differences Between Modernism and Postmodernism

modernism.....	Postmodernism
romanticism/Symbolism.....	paraphysics/Dadaism
form (conjunctive/closed).....	antiform (distinctive,open)
purpose.....	play
design.....	chance
hierarchy.....	anarchy
mastery/logos.....	exhaustion/silence
art object/finished work.....	process/performance/happening
distance.....	participation
creation/totalisation/synthesis	decreation/deconstruction/antithesis
presence.....	absence

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, "A Skeptical Feminist Postscript to the Postmodern." in Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber, eds, Postmodernism Across the Ages (Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 1993) 233

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide:Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1986) 110.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois, The Postmodern Condition Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "Postmodernity, or Living with Ambivalence" in Joseph Natoli and Linda, Hutcheon, eds., A Postmodern Reader (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1993) 11

centring.....	dispersal
genre/boundary.....	text/intertext
semantics.....	rhetoric
paradigm.....	syntagm
hypotaxis.....	parataxis
metaphor.....	metonymy
selection.....	combination
root/depth.....	rhysome/surface
interpretation/reading.....	against interpretaion/misreading
signified.....	signifier
lisible (readerly) .....	scriptible (writable)
narrative/ <i>grand histoire</i> .....	anti-narrative/ <i>petite histoire</i>
mastercode.....	idolect
symptom.....	desire
type.....	mutant
genital/phallic.....	polymorphous/androgynous
paranoia.....	schizophrenia
origin/cause.....	difference-difference/trace
God the Father.....	The Holy Ghost
metaphysics.....	irony
determinacy.....	indeterminacy
transcendence.....	immanence

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Note also that while Hassan's table, above, is one of the oldest and most well-known, other writers, notably Charles Jencks, have created similar lists of qualitative differences between Modernism and Postmodernism.<sup>9</sup>

Hassan's definition, although useful in conveying a general feel of Postmodernism, is less successful in clearly differentiating the Postmodern from the Modern, as there are certainly artworks and writings that have traditionally been thought of as Modern, and yet contain those Postmodern elements. Nevertheless, it remains a historically important schema, and is useful as a rough guide for the Postmodern.

However, if Postmodernism is defined solely in terms of stylistic themes, especially ones as amorphous and universal as "play", then one can locate "Postmodernism" in nearly any era, as

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<sup>8</sup> Hassan, Ihab, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> See Jencks, Charles, "The Values of Postmdernism," in *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*, London, Academy Editions, 1987.

numerous scholars have done.<sup>10</sup> Such a broad definition becomes essentially useless, especially in evaluating the political claims of Postmodernism. While Hassan's definition remains important, for clarity's sake this paper will use Lytoard's definition.

### **The When of Postmodernism**

The question of when Postmodern philosophical beliefs or artistic styles first appeared is not a particularly fruitful one, especially in terms of trying to assess Postmodernism's political legacy. Rather, let us ask: When did Americans begin to think of themselves as living within a Postmodern age, under a Postmodern condition, and when did they begin to make political claims upon that awareness?

The conference on structuralism hosted at Johns Hopkins in 1966 which brought Derrida, Lacan, Barthes and others to American shores, and not only introduced structuralism, but post-structuralism and deconstructionism to its audience, has been cited as a breakthrough moment in the dominance of French Theory in US academia.<sup>11</sup> The translation into English in 1972 of Horkheimer and Adorno's 1944 work, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its conception of the Enlightenment as "Totalitarian" and "Mass Deception" would contribute to the incredulity of the Enlightenment, a founding meta-narrative of academia. 1972 also sees the translation into English of Michel Foucault's 1969 work *Archeology of Knowledge*, while 1976 sees the first English translation of Derrida's 1967 *Of Grammatology*. While these books had all been read in American academia prior to translation into English, their translation in the 1970s speaks both to the perceived interest in academia, as well as their expanded availability to a non-specialist audience, especially undergraduates.

However, granting that all such periodizations include an element of the arbitrary, 1972 is as strong a contender for the starting point for the beginning of the Postmodern Era as any. Not only were the aforementioned translations published, the founding of the journal *boundary 2* in 1972 can also be

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<sup>10</sup> Readings and Schaber, Postmodernism Across the Ages

<sup>11</sup> Cusset, François, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008

argued for as the starting point of Postmodernism as a movement, if such a collection of trends can be described as such. This journal is significant in that it is the first to explicitly identify itself as a “Postmodern” journal, and as a periodical, it holds forth that Postmodern critique will be an ongoing process. (Indeed, *boundary 2* remains in publication today, though having changed its subtitle from “*a journal of postmodern literature*” to “*an international journal of literature and culture*.”) Further, as it is an American journal, it has a strong claim for the start of the American movement.

The first issue begins with a critique of Michel Foucault written by Edward Said, and ends with a book review written by Ihab Hassan. Full of Postmodern “play”, it is a “paracritical” “autoreview” of the latest work by the author- Ihab Hassan. It is a conversation between Hassan as “writer” “professor” and “reviewer”, and contains seeming non-sequiters such as a challenge to himself to write a program in Fortran to solve a given mathematical theorem. With such an issue, Postmodernism, while not yet dominant, has clearly arrived and has begun assembling both a canon of works and authors as well as a palate of methods and concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, while Postmodernism as a concept was safely ensconced in academia by the early 1970s, the term had made its way into general publications by the 1980s, skyrocketing in usage from the beginning of that decade until leveling off at the end of the 1990s<sup>13</sup>

To return to the titular question, *What Price Postmodernism?* What did it cost to create and disseminate Postmodernism? - at least \$1,363,640.56. While putting such a price on ideas is intentionally flippant, the numbers are derived from two of the most important sources for funding in the creation of Postmodernism.

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<sup>12</sup> *Boundary 2: A Journal of Postmodern Literature.*, Vol 1. Issue 1, Autumn, 1972

<sup>13</sup> [http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Postmodernism&year\\_start=1970&year\\_end=2000&corpus=0&smoothing=3&share=](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Postmodernism&year_start=1970&year_end=2000&corpus=0&smoothing=3&share=)

The first amount, for a total of \$35, 968. 56 was the cost of the conference on Structuralism at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. This conference is often cited as one of the most important seminal events in the introduction of Postmodernist ideas into the United States. Originally intended to introduce structuralism to the United States and thus “isolate the various types of structures, and their laws of patterning and change into which human events are distributed.”<sup>14</sup> In what is now a well-known and oft-told set piece in intellectual history, no sooner is Structuralism introduced to the United States, then does Jacques Derrida present, at this same conference, his critique of structuralism, launching “Theory’, ‘Critical Theory’, ‘Deconstruction’ and ‘Post-Structuralism’ into American academia.<sup>15</sup> The proceedings of this conference would be published as the “Structuralist Controversy” - that controversy dashing the organizers’ hopes that Structuralism could provide the means of explaining human events.<sup>16</sup> The money for the conference was provided by the Ford Foundation, and it should be noted that \$36, 000 has the comparative purchasing power of over a quarter of a million dollars today.<sup>17</sup> For that money the French Intellectuals were treated quite well- all travel expenses paid to fly in from France, lodging provided, and those presenting papers, an honorarium paid. Over the course of the conference the attendees were fed on roast sirloin, oysters on the half shell, Maryland crab in various preparations, as

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmond Koch, Grant Request, Humanities and the Arts Program, Ford Foundation, January 10, 1966. P.5 Ford Foundation Archives Grant File PA 66-108

<sup>15</sup> See Cusset, François, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; and Vallerie Cunningham “Theory, What Theory?” P.27 in , Daphne Patai and Wll H. Cohen eds, *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2005

<sup>16</sup> In an interesting historical counterfactual, in the original grant application to the Ford Foundation, the conference organizers intended Claude Levi-Strauss, the Structuralist anthropologist, to be one of the main speakers. Levi-Strauss was unable to attend, and in his place the young, relatively unknown Derrida attended. How might have the spread of poststructuralism, et.al. been delayed had Levi-Strauss been able to attend? Sigmond Koch, Grant Request, Humanities and the Arts Program, Ford Foundation, January 10, 1966. p.12 Ford Foundation Archives Grant File PA 66-108

<sup>17</sup> Comparative Purchasing Power computed from Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Indices at <ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/cpi/cpiiai.txt>

well as a variety of wines, champagne, port, sherry, vermouth, a different brandy every night, as well as cigars and something called “structuralist pastries.”<sup>18</sup>

The conference was the first major event of Johns Hopkins’ new Humanities Center founded by Richard Macksey. This center, was in part modelled on the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, a center of structuralist thought at which Levi-Strauss taught, and was also intended to do for the Humanities what the Institute for Advanced Study had done for the Natural Sciences. In this context, and considering the connections between the Ford Foundation and government agencies,<sup>19</sup> there is a whiff of Cold War politics surrounding the Humanities Center and the Structuralist Conference. After all, one of the attractions of structuralism was that it was intended to supplant previous theories of human activity, including materialistic, (that is, Marxist,) ones.

The National Endowment for the Humanities was the source of the larger portion of the figure quoted earlier. Between 1980 and 2012 the NEH funded forty-four projects on Postmodernism, for a total of \$1,327,672. Ihab Hassan alone received three grants between 1981 and 1989 totaling \$201,530. Thus the federal government played a large part in spreading Postmodernism in America. Of course, these two sources are not the only ones necessary for such promulgation, and the author’s continuing research will trace the money spent to fund the Humanities Center itself, Humanities Centers at other universities, the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California Irvine, (founded in the early 1980s), The School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell, (founded in 1976,) as well as the funding of journals such as *boundary 2*. When all of these costs are added together, it would seem the price of Postmodernism would be much higher than the figure cited earlier. The consequences of this cost in regards to the political claims of postmodernism will next be considered.

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<sup>18</sup> Grantee Narrative and Financial Report, January 30, 1969. p.78-79 Ford Foundation Archives Grant File PA 66-108

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Hugh Milford *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2008.

## The Political Claims of Postmodernism

While some argued that Postmodernism was apolitical, and merely chronicled the “condition” that Americans now found themselves in, others spoke of a “Postmodern agenda.” Charles Jencks, for example, wrote that Postmodernism was a movement and that “an essential goal of the Postmodern movement- the *movement* as opposed to the social *condition* -is to further pluralism, to overcome the elitism inherent in the previous paradigm.”<sup>20</sup> Jencks hoped to achieve this through linguistic critiques such as what he called double-coding (similar to deconstruction) that was “a strategy of affirming and denying the existing power structures at the same time, inscribing and challenging differing tastes and opposite forms of discourse.”<sup>21</sup>

Lyotard, for another example, held out hope that Postmodernism would redefine politics, into a realm of “non-zero-sum games” and “a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown.”<sup>22</sup>

The hope inherent to this position has been well summarized as follows:

“The Postmodern theory of decentered power also allows for the multiplication of possibilities for political struggle, no longer confined simply to the realm of production or the state. The idea that power and potential resistance are everywhere may therefore be more exhilarating than depressive and may help politicize new areas of social and personal existence.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, in the comments submitted to the Ford Foundation for the grant that funded the Structuralist Conference, one attendee, a then-undergrad, William Benzon, wished “good luck with the subversive aims of your new center.”<sup>24</sup> In a recent interview with now Dr. Benzon, he described that

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<sup>20</sup> Jencks, Charles “The Post-modern Agenda” in Jencks, Charles, ed. *The Post Modern Reader*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992 p.12

<sup>21</sup> Jencks, Charles “The Post-modern Agenda” in Jencks, Charles, ed. *The Post Modern Reader*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992 p.13

<sup>22</sup> Lyotard, Francois *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984 p. 67

<sup>23</sup> Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* New York, The Guilford Press, 1991 p. 286-287

<sup>24</sup> William Benzon, Attendee Remarks, p.60 Grantee Narrative and Financial Report, January 30, 1969. p.78-79 Ford Foundation Archives Grant File PA 66-108



comment as a fiction, and did not recall writing it at all.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, someone at the Humanities Center felt that their work was “subversive” and did not mind putting that into a report back to their benefactors.

However, many other leftists were far less sanguine about the emancipatory possibilities of Postmodernism. By the early 1990s critics feared that Postmodernism's abandonment of rationality and ideology was disempowering, rather than liberating. For example Noam Chomsky wrote:

“Remarkably, their left counterparts today often seek to deprive working people of these tools of emancipation, informing us that the 'project of the Enlightenment' is dead, that we must abandon the 'illusions' of science and rationality – a message that will gladden the hearts of the powerful, delighted to monopolize these instruments for their own use.”<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in *The Poverty of Postmodernism*, John O'Neill wrote, “Too much of the world still starves, dies young, and is wasted by systematic greed and evil for anyone to write the obituaries of philosophy, ideology and humanism.”<sup>27</sup>

Jürgen Habermas went so far as to argue not only was Postmodernism not useful for the left, - “the prospects (for social modernization to be guided into other, non-capitalist directions) are not good,” but was actually of service to the conservative movement, as:

“In the process, the disillusionment resulting from the failure of programmes for the false sublation of art and philosophy and the aporias of cultural modernity that have become apparent serve as pretexts for the conservative positions.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Willam Benzon, interview with author, September 13, 2013

<sup>26</sup> Chomsky, Noam, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*. Boston, South End Press, 1993, p. 286

<sup>27</sup> O' Niell, John, *The Poverty of Postmodernism* London, Routledge, 1995 p. 196

<sup>28</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project” in *Critical Theory, the Essential Readings* Ingram, David and Ingram, Julia Simon, eds. New York, Paragon House, 1991 (Note that this was the first English translation of which I am aware, but Habermas had actually first made this point in German in 1981.)

The author has made a detailed assessment of these competing political claims elsewhere<sup>29</sup> and, based on the political developments in the US since the rise of Postmodernism, finds that those skeptical of Postmodernism's emancipatory and subversive potential were, for the most part, correct. Now considering that the resources for Postmodernism came from establishment sources such as the federal government and the Ford Foundation, such an outcome is not surprising.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, in the case of intellectual movements in general, significant financial resources are necessary to the promulgation of intellectual movements. (A note of caution must be inserted here that money alone will not suffice. The year before the JHU conference, the Ford Foundation funded a conference at Bowdoin College on the "Unity of Knowledge" for \$35,000.<sup>30</sup> It has since fallen into obscurity, its proceedings mostly forgotten.)

Second, while not entirely undermining the claims to political radicalism of postmodernism made by its most ardent proponents, it certainly calls into question their claims when it is revealed that the funding for this "radical" "subversive" ideology was funded by some of the most mainstream, establishment, governmental and private sources. Jencks' hope that Postmodernism would eliminate elitism rings hollow when picturing Derrida, Lacan, et.al, eating oysters, sipping brandy, and smoking cigars on the banks of the Chesapeake. Perhaps the individuals involved were oblivious to the "revolutionary" potential of Postmodernism, but it gives one pause to see NEH award letters for this supposedly subversive ideology signed by William Bennett and Lynne Cheney.

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<sup>29</sup> This assessment as well as the current paper are part of the author's in-progress dissertation, *How We Became Postmodern*, conducted in pursuit of the Ph.D. in History at The Ohio State University.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmond Koch, Grant Request, Humanities and the Arts Program, Ford Foundation, January 10, 1966. p.4 Ford Foundation Archives Grant File PA 66-108